

## **Paper to the Cairngorms Local Outdoor Access Forum for 10 November 2021**

**Title:** Developing a visitor & access plan 2022-2027 for RSPB Abernethy

**Prepared by:** Uwe Stoneman, RSPB Senior Site Manager

**Presented by:** Uwe Stoneman and Sandy McCook on behalf of the Visitor & Access Group

### **Purpose:**

1. To seek advice and guidance on
  - a. The attached DRAFT Visitor & Access Plan developed jointly by the RSPB and members of the local community
  - b. What other relevant communities of interest we could consult to make this a stronger document
2. To ask for comments and feedback on the community engagement approach behind the development of this plan, and suggestions how this approach could be further developed in line with Scottish Land Commission guidelines.

### **Background and context for the draft plan:**

The RSPB has welcomed visitors at Loch Garten and Abernethy since 1959 when it took a bold and at the time ground-breaking decision: to protect one of the very first nesting pairs of ospreys after a long period of absence from the UK *and* invite the public to come and view them. Since then, well over one million people have visited Loch Garten and its world-famous ospreys.

The last three decades have seen a gradual decline in visitors to the centre at Loch Garten, while at the same time there has been an increase in visitors to other parts of the RSPB reserve and a shift towards new types of visitors who want to explore the area independently.

By 2018, there were around 100,000 visits to Abernethy Forest. 25,000 of these were to the Centre at Loch Garten, another 25,000 were to the trails around Loch Garten and Loch Mallachie, and the remaining 50,000 were visits to other parts of the forest and up to Ryvoan and Bynack. We don't currently have people on the higher ground, i.e. in the area around Loch Avon, Ben Macdui and Cairngorm but anecdotal evidence suggests that this area is also getting busier.

The RSPB runs Abernethy as a nature reserve, safeguards the Primacy of Nature, actively manages the area for conservation and has a legal responsibility for designated features, protected habitats and species. The RSPB welcomes visitors and is fully committed to SOAC, Core Paths and Rights of Way.

At Abernethy, the RSPB maintains around 50 kilometres of tracks, four bridges and three car parks: at Loch Garten, Loch Mallachie and Garten Woods. Most of the Speyside Way section between Nethy Bridge and Boat of Garten runs through the RSPB reserve and so do some routes of the 'Explore Abernethy' path network. There are two MBA bothies on the reserve: Fords of Avon and Ryvoan. The RSPB provides free firewood at the latter. There are welcome signs and information boards at entry points to the reserve, information about fire safety and fire beater stations. The RSPB offers events and guided walks, and each year welcomes birdwatching tours, organised visits, education and school visits, Duke of Edinburgh Award groups and organised events such as the 'Cairngorms 100' equestrian event (biannual) and the 'Abernethy Highland Games Forest Road Race'.

The RSPB works with the CNPA on fire safety, regularly updating fire-danger signs, and on conservation measures to protect ground-nesting birds, maintaining signs to ask people to keep dogs on leads in key areas from April to August.

This year (2021) RSPB, FLS and Rothiemurchus Estate have been involved in a project funded by the Cairngorms Capercaillie Project, aimed at better understanding visitor and their needs and how we can provide a high-quality visitor experience and protect capercaillie.

In 2021, the RSPB and Nethy Bridge & Vicinity Community Council started the '60-Year Vision' initiative to develop stronger community engagement, using the Scottish Land Commission's guidance as a framework. As part of this initiative the RSPB and the Community Council invited volunteers to join a group to develop a Visitor & Access Plan for Abernethy. A call for volunteers was posted on local social media sites and (because of Covid restrictions) the first 12 people who responded were selected to form the group. The group does now have 15 active community members and has met face-to-face four times.

This DRAFT Visitor & Access Plan was developed jointly by the group, and at this point we would like to ask the Cairngorms LOAF for guidance and advice. We are also inviting comments from the wider communities of Nethy Bridge and Boat of Garten at consultation events in November and probably early December.

We would also like to hear the Cairngorms LOAF's view on the community engagement approach we have taken so far and which communities of interest we could consult to make this a stronger document.

We intend to put this 5-year plan into action starting 1 April 2022, alongside the new 5-year management plan for the RSPB's Abernethy nature reserve (currently being written).

**Draft plan – attached**

Uwe Stoneman, 29 October 2021